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**JOURNEY TO ABSOLUTE HAPPINESS IN DINSMAN'S ABSURD PLAY *IT IS NOT A SUICIDE***

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**ABSTRACT**

The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd is believed to have emerged in Malaysia during the political upheaval following the tragedy of the May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 racial riot. Since then, absurd theatre style has become prominent among young playwrights during the period of Experimental Theatre. Regardless of its rejection by many local theatre critics and audience for its influence and epistemology, absurd theatre style is viewed to be able to portray the ideas that are deemed impossible to be presented through typical realistic theatre. Whilst many Malay dramatists focused on the aesthetic elements in their plays, Dinsman on the other hand had examined the thematic preoccupations as well as the philosophical underpinnings. Realizing the social background of the local audience in which were still considered to be strongly adhered to their religious and cultural values, Dinsman had intelligently appropriated the typical absurd play to become a play that is uniquely his own. This paper focuses on the style applied by Dinsman in his translated play, *It Is Not a Suicide*. It further examines the playwright's discourse on human spiritual inadequacies through the framework of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas's *The Concept of Happiness*. This article intends to highlight the subject on the nature of man who wishes to fulfil his metaphysical needs; the one of many aspects that has been overlooked by many local theatre critics on Malay absurd works.

**Keywords:** Theatre of the Absurd, theatre techniques, philosophical underpinnings, spiritual inadequacies, Naquib Al-Attas's *The Concept of Happiness*

**INTRODUCTION**

In achieving a modern nation, we tend to overlook that a sole emphasis on economics alone is found to be insufficient. The interpretations of progress in a modern world could have easily related to the material fulfillment that is believed to bring prosperity and happiness to all mankind. However, the spiritual element that is equally important in the concept of human development has been neglected. This materialistic approach without reference to spiritual

requirements certainly contradicts with the teachings of Islam. This is simply because the secular concept to attain happiness is so much stresses on material achievement rather than the fulfillment in the spiritual aspects. This is in contrast to the Islamic point of view that, “development must create balance between [humans’] material needs and [their] spiritual requirements” (Al-Roubaie, 2010, p. 327-328). In other words, the meaning of progress becomes a means for increasing humans’ satisfaction and happiness in this life and the hereafter. Material gain alone does not guarantee a happy life, let alone to make anyone to feel secured and satisfied entirely. Therefore, the concept of happiness itself that is understood by many Muslims nowadays has become so tainted and the search for happiness becomes superficial. As mentioned by Professor Al-Attas, Islamic worldview not only represents more than the physical world surrounding us but also it includes the world hereafter (2001, p.1). The concept of happiness must extends beyond the present life in order to achieve the balance of becoming the ideal servant of God, whose main existence is to worship nothing but God.

*It Is Not A Suicide* resembles what had happened during the period of political changes which in turn contributed to the rise of absurd theatre ‘ala’ Malaysia<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s. It was also the period when young playwrights in the era had found that the typical realistic plays to be outmoded in representing what had happened at that time. The play is heavy with the trappings of philosophical views of the playwright that depicts the personal conflict of individuals who are struggling to grope with the challenges of modernization. Through the method of appropriation, Dinsman had successfully transformed a typical absurd play that is atheistic in nature to be his own version of an absurd play that is indeed religiously oriented.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

In the advent of becoming a modern society, the issue of happiness is often ignored, since happiness has become a subject of a personal accomplishment. It can also be mentioned here that such discourse is not only rare to be highlighted in Malay plays, but also the subject itself is indeed very philosophical. In realizing this, the playwright had experimented with the absurd style to portray the situations that realistic theatre style was found to be restricted. However, the relevance of appropriating the absurd theatre style was deemed unsuitable due to its origins and the epistemology (Siti Jasmina Ibrahim, 2005). Regardless of the philosophies that underpinned the style of the absurd theatre, Dinsman had appropriated the typical western absurd style to be the style that had become uniquely his own. The portrayal of an unhappy individual who intends to seek happiness in his own meaningless interpretations of life needs special attention, hence the playwright’s insights would be properly highlighted.

## **OBJECTIVE**

This paper intends to analyze the method of appropriation applied by the playwright in the play, *It Is Not A Suicide*, thus would justify this play not as pessimistic and atheistic as thought and claimed by many local critics.

## **METHOD**

The paper will be analyzed through the limelight of Al-Attas's concept of happiness. It is hoped that it will bring the readers to an insightful journey of human being finding meaning and true happiness in life by going back to the path of religion. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to bring some light to Dinsman's play that still functions within the Islamic parameters specifically.

## **THE RISE OF THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN MODERN MALAY THEATRE**

The influence of the Theatre of the Absurd is believed to have emerged in Malaysia during the political upheaval following the tragedy of the May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 riot<sup>2</sup>. Tracing back to the origins of this type of theatre, absurd theatre was an anti-literary movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was born and nurtured in Europe during the post-World War II era. Existentialist notions and impression of pessimisms, which arose after the terrible and horrifying war, had led to the birth of this form of theatre. Some of the European playwrights questioned the truism of the so-called progress, civilization, and the reality of individuals in their plays.

In Malaysia, the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd on the Malay playwrights occurred very much later; especially in the early 1970s when the Malay playwrights were seeking new alternatives as an approach to theatrical production. Krishen Jit once mentioned "what distinguishes each play from the next and brings out a response from many playwrights in each generation, are the political events, which have shaped and scarred the country"<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, events such as the May, 13<sup>th</sup> 1969 riot became a starting point for the restructuring of the society, especially the Malays. Solehah Ishak pointed out in her article, "Trends of Modern Malay Theatre" that, as a response to the riot, the government began to strengthen the acts and new ones were introduced. The New Economic Policy was introduced as a solution to eradicate the economic problems faced by the Malays. The policy which was implemented on July 1st, 1969 had encouraged the Malays to leave their *kampungs* to move to urban areas and ventured into labor intensive industries and obtained the 30% of the Malay equity capital (163). According to her, the change in political and social milieu had indeed brought a significant change to the Modern Malay Theatre in that period. She added that events such as May the 13<sup>th</sup>, resulted in a more earnest and serious response from the local playwrights. She further mentioned it was the period that playwrights were more sensitive towards the changes inherent in the society. "The anger, hopelessness, turmoil and chaos prevalent in their society are reflected in the abstract plays of this decade as dramatists grope to find meaning and give direction to their shattered and splintered milieu" (170). It can be said that Theatre of the Absurd had become the preferred alternative tool to channel the playwrights' responses, insights and feelings towards the social changes in the society at that time. The racial riot led to the requisitioning of national identity and purpose, which affected too many spheres of Malaysian life.

With regards to style, the playwrights of this era tend to experiment with new approaches in combination with traditional theatre techniques with new approaches that not only reinforce the Malay culture but also to give the plays a dynamic contemporary meaning and image (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 145). It was during this time, that many playwrights had a strong tendency to experiment with the absurd theatre. The struggle within an individual self had become one of the most experimented subject matter in these works, in which resembles a soul who was confused in the vortex of change in the new society. Hence, the absurd technique was deemed fit to portray the struggles within an individual who intended to seek his roots and identity as the absurd techniques contain strong allegorical elements<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the strong allegorical elements became a suitable mode for the playwrights to express their insights in their works.

A closer look at the works that were produced by these playwrights of the 1970s, shows that their works give primary attention to individual existential and psychological dilemmas experienced by most of the characters found in the plays (NurNina Zuhrah & Rahmah Bujang, 1988, p. 144). Hence, the plays that were written during this period reflect on the issues that are existential and commonly represented by individuals who are caught in self-conflict to find the meaning of life. The playwrights highlighted the dilemmas and confusions in their works through the characters in the plays. The pain and confusions further reflect on the playwrights' insights and their concerns over social issues which took place at that time (Mohd. Ramli Raman, 1991, p. 21-23). While the main priority of realistic plays is to represent a realistic representation of any theatrical forms, absurd plays on the contrary highlights the conflict in the individual's self, and the insights for meaning and truths in life. The most common absurd techniques applied would be repetitive and nonsensical words that is evident in the dialogues. This paper perceives that the experiments by many playwrights during this period were more like an attempt to produce something different in the concept of Malay absurd theatre. However, it is found that the experimentations made by these playwrights were not widely accepted by the local theatre critics and the audience. This is mainly because the plays were perceived to be vague and difficult to be understood (Nur Nina Zuhrah, 154). As a result, the absurd plays have created confusion among the audience, as they cannot comprehend the message that the playwrights intended to present.

The rise of the absurd theatre in the period of the Experimental Theatre has been deemed as unfit for the Malay theatrical arena. Since the Malaysian society is still basically a religious society, the western influence on the absurd plays is seen to be negating religious values which contradicts with the Islamic values. This phenomenon is closely related to its absurd origins and its epistemology, which have then created much confusion among the audience and most local theatre critics. With the advent period of the Islamic revivalism in Malay theatre in the 1980s, this has eliminated the opportunity of the absurd plays to sustain its popularity in the Malay theatrical arena.

## **AL-ATTAS AND THE CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS**

In his book, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, Al-Attas explains that happiness is a concept that relates between humans and God. This bond allows humans to achieve perfection of the mind, body and soul. Happiness is described as to be having blessed lives which become the ultimate goal for humans, as the servants of God. Therefore, all in this world have merely become passports for individuals, for eternal lives in the world hereafter.

Happiness according to Al-Attas is termed as *Saadah*, and it relates to two dimensions of existence. The first dimension of the concept of happiness is *dunnyawiyah* which means the happiness in the present world and the second is *ukhrawiyah* which is the happiness in the world hereafter. In respect to the world hereafter, *Saadah* refers to the ultimate happiness, which is the more everlasting felicity and bliss in one's life. This is the highest being to the vision of God, promised to those who in worldly life have lived in willing submission, conscious and knowing obedience of God's commands and prohibitions. Hence, in Islam, it is important to balance both dimensions of happiness, as a proper life in the present world will lead to a promised happiness in the world hereafter. (2001, p. 91) Al-Attas emphasizes that happiness in the present world pertains not only to be found in secular life, but also with life as interpreted and guided by religion whose source is Revelation (ibid).

Al-Attas's emphasis on the concept of happiness under the limelight of Islamic perspectives has been found to be in contrast to the concept that is well-known to many Muslims nowadays. Many Muslims are not aware that the concept that they have in mind were actually being secularized by the western school of thoughts. This is simply because in the Islamic concept of happiness, happiness is not only attained in the present world, but is also sought and achieved in the present world which would lead to the happiness in the hereafter. In contrast to the Western school of thought that, happiness is an ultimate accomplishment in life and choices are meant to be an individual goal to what is best in one's life. The modern conception of happiness that is prevalent in the West today has undergone changes, bringing with it not only moral decadence and crisis, but political dissension and conflict as well. Islamic perspectives do not agree on the basic premises made by the Aristotelian position that virtue and happiness relate only to this present world (Al-Roubaie, 2010, p. 327-328). Consequently, happiness that has become a permanent condition experienced consciously in the course of our worldly life is unattainable.

## ANALYSIS

Under this concept, Al-Attas discussed happiness under the limelight of Islamic perspectives. Al-Attas suggested that in achieving happiness, humans must seek from different dimensions which are the happiness in the present world and happiness in the world hereafter. It is important to note that humans must be able to strike a balance from both dimensions of happiness, as a proper life in the present world will promise an ultimate happiness in the world hereafter. When humans are unable to understand and fail to follow God's commands and prohibitions, the happiness that is sought after will only become superficial.

In *It Is Not A Suicide*, Adam is not happy. His knowledge and all the worldly achievements that he gets throughout his entire life seem to be meaningless. This can be seen in the lines,

Adam: And I don't know for what I must live if I don't understand anything. For what do I live? What do I want to do with this empty life? (*It Is Not A Suicide*, p.155)

He feels empty spiritually, and he seeks fulfilment to all his yearnings. He endlessly searches for the meaning of life from many sources which would include through his readings and attending lessons from respectable teachers. He tries to find the answers from his father, and yet he fails to find what he is looking for. Thus, he fails miserably. After endless search, he later decides to commit suicide as he wants to meet God and seeks the answers that he has

been looking for. Unfortunately, his preoccupations on his nature of existence have turned Adam to be lost. In the lines,

Adam: (*He climbs the pile of books while reflecting on the noose*). Today, today I will no longer wait for you. Today, (*holds the noose*) today I will go to you. I will not commit suicide. This is my last attempt to meet you. There is only this left for me to do. (Suddenly) Heh, don't, don't bother me. This is my affair. (*It Is Not A Suicide* , p.153)

The lines indicate that life at the moment is perceived to be a burden. He is not happy, as he fails to achieve to get what he wants. He finally decides that he will no longer wait and therefore, he feels he has no other choice left. Adam thinks that his action to end his life is thought to be permissible. Suicide to him is a representation of his realistic action to seek what he must find rather than not doing anything and ends up feeling forever hopeless for the rest of his life.

The pile of books as a main setting of this play depicts that Adam reads well. He intends to find the meaning of his existence that can fulfil his spiritual void. The void is unbearable. Somehow he could not relate himself and his connection to the Creator, in this context is God, to the life of his own. The readings indicate that he tries to seek for true eternity through logic, and here it tells us the logic that he has in mind is the logic that is formed without proper groundings of Islam. When this happens, it is so easy for Adam's mind to be influenced and shaped by the secular concept of logic. This can be seen through the play, when Adam thinks that by meeting God himself, he might find the answers that he seeks. However, he does not realize that eternal happiness cannot be found through mere logic. The search of finding the meaning of happiness in the present world should not only pertain in secular life, but also as interpreted and guided by religion whose source is through revelation. Hence by achieving this, it would then be paralleled to the balance dimensions of happiness that was proposed by the teachings of Islam that is, happiness that is achieved in the present world will ensure the eternal happiness in the world hereafter.

Happiness is described as to be having a blessed life which becomes the ultimate goal for humans, not as a servant to anybody, to anything, but only to God the Almighty. Al-Attas also mentions that the destiny of achieving happiness in present life and in *ukhrawiyyah* or the world hereafter are very much dependent upon which aspect it chooses to align itself in a preponderant way. Adam knows he can continue his life with a clear contention that his life is not his entirely. He must seek the way to gain what is to be achieved similar to the servant of God who seeks divine approval to live life ideally.

At the end of the play, Adam reconsiders his plan for suicide. This indicates that he finally finds out that he needs to reconcile with his wild thoughts. He tends to accept the fact that there is hope to find God and what he needs is to continue searching. But then again the question of how Adam wants to begin searching or where he can gain the answers totally depends on him alone. Adam needs a very strong foundation in Islamic teachings in order to understand and to know the religion better. This is the part that really highlights the distinct feature which differentiates Dinsman from other western absurd playwrights. The play offers a closure when Adam ruminates on reconciliation of his suicidal plan and decides to seek the meaning of life through religion.

Closure in *It Is Not A Suicide* is Dinsman's way in appropriating the play to become socially and religiously oriented. The playwright's strong beliefs in religion become evident and that has proved this play adheres to Islamic principle which prohibits any forms of hopelessness<sup>5</sup>. Dinsman's closure hails for more optimistic life than that usually assumed by other well-known western absurd plays.

## CONCLUSION

Dinsman had created a play that is heavy with the discussions of human existential issues. Hence, it is deemed impossible to depict the issues raised through typical realistic style in which realistic style had its limitations. Absurd theatre style was perceived to be fit to represent humans' psychological dilemmas into interesting visual representations for further reflections and discussions by the audience at large. Even though Dinsman's appropriations on absurd theatre style had created plenty of misleading criticisms, *It Is Not A Suicide* is a creative depiction of the playwright's insights. It is important to highlight on the playwright's closure at the end of the play. As compared to the typical absurd style, there is no conclusion to the matter raised. The play ends well with a closure that signifies there is hope to Adam's sufferings. By going back to the path of religion will be the only way to save Adam from being unhappy and feeling of worthlessness. This is the part that represents Dinsman's mode of appropriation from a typical pessimistic ending to a play with a closure which resembles hope for the betterment of the newly structured society.

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<sup>1</sup> Solehah Ishak. 1990. Trends of modern Malay theatre. *Malay Literature Journal*. 3(2), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Racial riots of May 13, 1969. Much has been written on this topic. Amongst others see Mahathir Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1979), Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13<sup>th</sup> and After* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press, 1969), and National Operations Council, *The May 13<sup>th</sup> Tragedy* (Kuala Lumpur: National Operations Council, 1969)

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the article by Lim Cheng Hoe, "Politics Play A Part," *The Star*. 23 May 2003 Theatre: 3

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Abdul Rahman Napiah via email dated December 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dinsman on 20 November 2009.

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